

***Note:** it is normally a pet peeve of mine when people say “the office” when they really mean an individual employee, or “the board” when they mean an individual member of the board. But for the purposes of this document, I think it is accurate to refer to the board as a whole. As individuals, I have always found the members of the MAGFest Board of Directors to be pleasant, reasonable, and well-meaning. As a previous board member myself, I enjoyed the camaraderie we shared, and felt genuinely positive about my relationships with the other members. If you think about your favorite board member, or the one you think is the most reasonable, I know it is probably difficult to imagine that they participated in some of the situations that my colleagues and I are describing. But I assure you that they are all collectively responsible for enabling and perpetuating these harmful and inappropriate behaviors. As a group, I feel they represent an enormous threat to MAGFest’s survival and growth, and so it is with great sadness that I feel compelled to share this letter after trying to escalate concerns via our normal procedures for months.*

Hey everyone,

You probably know me, but if you don’t, I’m Debra Lenik, the events director for MAGFest, Inc. and a full-time employee. I was hired as the office project manager in May 2017, promoted to events director in June 2019, and volunteered to serve as interim executive director in July 2019, when our previous executive director, Nick Marinelli, decided to step down. I provided instrumental guidance to the Board of Directors (BoD) during the search for our new executive director, and was happy to hand that title off to Paul Birtel in March 2020, returning to my normal position as events director. (You may also recognize me as the person who got a cooler full of beans poured on my head when the MAG Telethon reached its fundraising goal, or perhaps via the :debrector: emoji on Slack.)

After a terrible work experience as a younger person, I decided that I would not keep a job where I dreaded going to work in the morning. It’s admittedly a low bar, but it’s been a guiding principle of my career since age 19. MAGFest originally met that standard and then some. I love this community, full stop. You all energize and inspire me. It feels incredible and humbling to be able to help build something that is so much bigger than the sum of its parts.

I decided to write this letter, however, because I realized that that incredible feeling has been almost completely nonexistent for me over the past year. Experiencing anxiety and dread in 2020 is natural; we’ve all been there. But experiencing anxiety and dread at the hands of people who are supposed to be your allies, collaborators, and leaders is uniquely paralyzing and demoralizing. It has both passively and actively prevented me from doing the work I love for the people I love, and represents an enormous cost to the organization both literally and figuratively.

**The TL;DR from my perspective:**

- **The BoD does not really know what they are doing.**
  - Very little experience on other boards.
  - No role descriptions or onboarding procedures.
  - No standardization of meeting processes, agendas, or notes.

- They primarily view themselves as cultural leaders rather than organizational or financial leaders.
- They intentionally structured the ED job description as a “paid board member” to make up for these deficiencies.
- Frequently cite “but we’re not a normal nonprofit” as a reason why.
- **That would be ok if they had good judgment, but they mostly don’t.**
  - They rely *extremely heavily* on legal counsel for guidance.
  - Partially as a corollary to the above, they have significantly overstepped and mishandled multiple staffing-related and HR-related issues—not just historically, but also this year.
- **Even *that* would be ok if they listened to others, but they are egotistical and insecure about their roles.**
  - As the sole legal members of MAGFest, they view themselves as accountable for (i.e. entitled to weigh in on or wade in on) everything within its borders.
  - They have a deep and abiding mistrust of the office, who are all seasoned professionals hired for their expertise. I have been told this by multiple board members, including my supervisor who has cited being hired to “fix” a “toxic” office—one that by most accounts was the tightest-run team of employees that MAGFest has ever had before the arrival of my supervisor.
  - They respond very poorly to any implication they should not do something because it is in the office’s domain (see examples in my detailed account below).
  - They consistently deprioritize attempts to retire longtime board members and add new members (see [Josiah’s](#) and [Shir’s](#) accounts).
  - Again, they view themselves as cultural leaders of the organization and have said so verbatim to volunteers.
- **Meanwhile, they neglect their actual responsibilities, like the annual budget and managing the executive director.**
  - We’ve paid enormous legal costs in the past year (it’s complicated because of the retainer structure, but you could probably estimate ~\$2-6k per month in BoD costs alone—which means some months cost us as much as the warehouse).
  - They gave no update regarding a formal HR complaint filed by all 6 employees against the Executive Director between a group meeting on August 7 and a message from our HR manager on November 5, which informed us that the next check-in on the matter would be scheduled in ***early January (5 months after the initial complaint)***.
  - I was also informed that ***they did not take our HR complaint as seriously because we submitted it together as a group.***
  - They insist that the Executive Director spend enormous amounts of time in board meetings and 1-on-1 meetings with individual board members, despite the clear negative effect it has on his workload and ability to lead the office.
- **Sadly, our Executive Director is neither a good fit for our community nor for this role, but as mentioned above, they have yet to tell us what they plan to do about it.**
  - Beginning in early April, I repeatedly found myself on the receiving end of what I considered to be unnecessarily aggressive behavior from my supervisor,

including confrontational DMs and harsh criticisms of my performance and behavior in front of coworkers on several occasions. I did not report these at the time, nor did I speak to any of my coworkers about them.

- Additionally, he had a public argument with several volunteers on June 5 in #burnout-discussions, which cemented my feelings that this behavior was part of a wider pattern, and was not fixable or trainable by MAGFest (at least not on a reasonable or financially responsible timeframe).
- At a meeting with all the employees which was specifically scheduled so we could openly discuss the situation, he harangued me verbally, this time in front of all my coworkers. He also did this to Dac.
- At this time, the rest of the employees thought it would be appropriate to begin a formal HR process. We began with individual mediations. I cannot speak for my coworkers, but my supervisor came to our mediation (which, again, was scheduled to address his negative behavior) armed with a litany of complaints against me, including that I engage in “public displays of insubordination”; that by turns I am “abrasive,” “confrontational,” “disrespectful,” and “unsupportive”; and that I “refuse to work professionally with all volunteers” (meaning the BoD).
- I am [linking here the documentation](#) I sent to the board following both of my mediation sessions with my supervisor (which I truly did try to approach with an open heart and mind). I received an acknowledgement of my email, but no other response.
- **They reeeeeeeally don’t want people to know all this, or pretty much anything.**
  - They have cultivated an atmosphere of secrecy and one-on-one conversations to cushion themselves from accountability or examination.
  - Often say they’re the most transparent board they know of, but [no notes have been published](#) in 2020.
  - The board secretary takes verbatim notes which can’t be released until they are sanitized, but no effort has been made to sanitize said notes, nor assign/hire someone to take non-verbatim notes.
  - They only began releasing agendas this summer after significant pressure from me personally, and they don’t include secret meetings/executive sessions/unofficial meetings which is a large majority of board time.
  - Non-office guests have rarely or never been included in 2020.
  - They removed me & Emily from hotel negotiations for no apparent reason; it took two full days for me to convince them to add us back on.
- **They retaliate against people who make them uncomfortable in any of the above.**
  - PB told me that a specific board member wanted to cut me out of the hotel negotiations as a direct result of me saying I wanted more diverse eyes on our PR responses.
  - Multiple employees have been reprimanded for speaking our minds in front of other employees, particularly if it takes more than one message to get our thoughts across (which has been portrayed as “not constructive,” “arguing,” “fighting,” “drawing lines in the sand,” “kicking and screaming,” and more).
  - Again, see [Josiah’s](#) and [Shir’s](#) accounts.

- See full account of my disciplinary action below.
- ***The BoD has consistently, repeatedly failed to uphold the [core values](#) of our community in doing all of the above.***
- Overall, they are **not the right fit to run the company** at the highest levels.

Hoo boy. This has gotten way too long, unfortunately in large part because there is so much source material, but I'm happy to provide further documentation if any truly self-punishing folks want to see it. I will only tell one more story in detail.

A little over two weeks ago, on Tuesday November 3, I received a message from our HR manager, Jasmin, asking whether I was available to meet with the BoD that day or the next day. I had intentionally not scheduled any meetings that night since it was Election Day, but this request was unusual, so I told her I was free that evening.

The meeting that followed was, bar none, the most humiliating, hurtful, and unfair experience I have ever been subjected to in my entire professional life. The documentation was provided to me only after I arrived at the meeting; PB was not present. I've attached [that documentation](#) here, along with [my own refutation](#) of the points that were made. Embarrassing as it may read, I have no qualms about sharing it because almost every single example in the document was either false or mischaracterized to such a degree that it felt deliberate. When I said as much in the meeting, I was told that even if that were the case, there were more examples that could have been given, and that this meeting was about overall problematic patterns that the board had observed with my communication.

I was floored. I am not perfect, nowhere near it, but I am not a problematic employee and never have been—passionate and opinionated, certainly, but not someone deserving of disciplinary action. I believe the staff generally trust me *because* I am candid, and I think most people would agree that I am reasonable and thoughtful, with excellent written and spoken communication skills. The pettiness and hyperbole of the examples that were cited, and the resistance with which my objections were met, underscored to me that the reality of what had actually happened did not matter to them—only how it made them feel. Don't get me wrong; I understand that intent does not necessarily equal impact, and I do not want to invalidate the feelings of those board members whom I offended with my statements. However, I object strenuously to them ***subverting our normal HR procedures in an attempt to legitimize a group shaming and gaslighting session*** of a talented and capable employee.

The BoD took care to emphasize to me that this “initial disciplinary notice” was *not* a performance improvement plan, though it ***mandated that I personally research and carry out my own training*** while at 75% time/pay, and also required 30-day and 60-day check-ins. I was busy that week interviewing vision team candidates and preparing for MAGCon with my colleagues. Why did the board find it such a high priority to give me this disciplinary notice and put me on this plan? At this time, the employees had still not heard back from the board about any movement on our complaint against our supervisor.

When I asked my supervisor the next day why he had not been present at the review, he said that he was under the impression that the meeting was supposed to focus on my time as interim executive director, before his time at MAGFest. Jasmin corroborated this. I cannot imagine why the board thought that this would be a good use of my time or of theirs. I could not get to sleep that night, and instead stayed up drafting my resignation letter. Thanks only to the kindness and love of my coworkers and my close friends among the staff, I decided not to resign, but the fact remains that the board's actions brought me this close to quitting a job that I genuinely loved and had put so much of myself into is incredibly painful.

Ok, actually, one more thing to add. Remember up there when I said that my disciplinary meeting was the most humiliating, hurtful, and unfair experience I have ever been subjected to? I seem to be fortunate in that I only had to do it once, whereas Josiah and Shir had to undergo similar treatment *every week for several months—and they are **unpaid volunteers***. If that is not hazing, I don't know what is. I'm astonished and appalled that this behavior was not only permitted, but enthusiastically endorsed by the group of people who purport to be the cultural leaders of this organization. I cannot ethically support "friendship re-education camp" or other absurdly unfair barriers to entry to MAGFest, and you shouldn't either.

Please, do not think that this letter is my first attempt to address the issues that are detailed below. In fact, it will be my last. Those of you who know me know that I place a high value on process and communication, and I have made many attempts to bring my concerns to the proper parties and escalate them professionally and appropriately. I did this while continuing to do my job in good faith, to the best of my ability, and while trying to minimize any disruption to the staff. But ultimately what I keep finding is that nobody is watching the watchmen (who do you go to when you want to [report](#) a problem with the president of the board, the entire board, and the executive director?) and the watchmen are more concerned with being watched than they are with steering the ship (if you'll excuse the mixed metaphor). So I feel it is my ethical duty to remind the community that even though the watchmen technically hold all the power, they derive that power from us and from the work that we do, and so it falls to us to hold them meaningfully accountable when they will not do so themselves.

In my time at MAGFest, I have seen a lot of tumult. This community is home to so much passion and so many personalities, and it takes patience, compassion, good humor, and courage to navigate it. I have been through incredibly difficult times with this community and never once thought to myself, "Shoot, we might actually be totally screwed." The MAGFest that I know and love is resilient, innovative, and uses its values to light the path forward, however difficult. I genuinely hope that MAGFest pulls through one more time.

In large part because of this message, I am not certain I will be permitted to keep my job, stay on Slack, or continue to volunteer at or even attend events. The board has already repeatedly retaliated against me, personally and specifically, and I am facing the sad truth that this may be the final straw.

If the worst happens, please feel free to reach out to me at [dlenik@gmail.com](mailto:dlenik@gmail.com), 856-275-7478, or [derb#9800](#) on Discord if you want to catch up or stay in touch. Keep [#emoji-requests](#) and

#ivanops alive and kicking in my absence, and please—take care of yourselves and pay attention to your own values and boundaries.

all my love,

Debra